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U.S. Education Reform and the Maintenance of White Supremacy through Structural Violence

Deborah M. Keisch
deborahpolin@gmail.com

Tim Scott
University of Massachusetts Amherst, timscottma@gmail.com

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Abstract

U.S public schools are more segregated today than they have been since before the desegregation efforts that followed the 1954 Supreme Court case, Brown v. Board of Education, (Kozol, 2005, Mullins, 2013; Rothstein, 2013; Strauss, 2014; UCLA, 2014). Coinciding with this segregation are vast racial inequities and stratification, which are being intensified through the policies known as corporate education reform. In this article, we share the voices and stories of scholars and education activists who have documented the racism and segregation of U.S. public schooling over the rise of corporate education reform. We start with the current state of our segregated schools, what Jonathan Kozol refers to as "apartheid education" (Kozol, 2005). We then take a step back and look at the historical and ideological context of U.S. schooling under industrial capitalism, white supremacy and neoliberalism, all creating the perfect storm for the punitive and dehumanizing conditions within 21st century public education. We will then explore the formula of corporate education reform through an examination of specific instruments used to enact these policies: school choice and charters, high-stakes testing, and the disciplining and criminalizing of black and brown bodies. We also examine the delivery of these policies via the discourse used to justify them and the intentions behind them. Finally, we call the question of whether public schools are our best hope for achieving social and economic equity and how those working in this struggle might keep that vision in mind.

Author Biography

This article was co-authored by Deborah Keisch and Tim Scott. Deborah Keisch is a cultural anthropologist who has worked in the field of education for over two decades as a practitioner, researcher and activist. She was a founding producer of Education Radio, a documentary-style radio program that shared the stories of students, teachers, scholars and activists experiencing the impacts of corporate education reform policy. She is also a founder and organizer with the Public Schools Action Coalition, a group of parents and teachers fighting for equity in their local public schools. Deborah has a Masters in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from UMass Amherst. Tim Scott is a psychotherapist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He worked for a number of years in NYC, first as a school counselor in a public junior high school, then as a youth harm reduction clinician with the Special Health Outreach to Urban Teens program. Tim also worked as a union organizer for seven years and was a community organizer for more than a decade. He was a founding producer of Education Radio, a documentary-style radio program that shared the stories of students, teachers, scholars and activists experiencing the impacts of corporate education reform policy. Originally from Ogden Utah, Tim holds an MSW degree and his doctoral work is in social justice education.

U.S. Education Reform and the Maintenance of White Supremacy through Structural Violence[1]

> *"We have, in the country, a history of not just the police, but the state, the law enforcement agencies, disrespecting black life. And it's disrespected in hundreds of ways. And then the police are just one expression of that. And again, we can measure that now. It's not simply a question of asking. And it's not the same as saying, "Is the country racist?" or even, "Are the police racist?" We live in a system in which black life is devalued. And it's reflected in our schools."*

john a. powell, August 19th, 2014, in an interview with Amy Goodman about the events in Ferguson, MO.

Introduction

In the midst of the writing of this article, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed, 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The events that quickly followed—Brown's bloody body left lying for hours in the street for all to see; the violent militarized police response to community expressions of pain and anger; the perpetuation of a blaming narrative about racial violence by framing Brown as a wilding "demon" who attacked Wilson which provided the subterfuge to exonerate Wilson of the crime; and establishment leaders pathologizing the ensuing social unrest—are emblematic of a deeply rooted violent design in U.S. society.

Michael Brown's murder is just one of countless reminders that we live in a society that deems the lives of Black and Brown people disposable. This disposability is never so evident than in the vast racial inequities that have always existed within the U.S. public school system, and now being intensified through policies known as corporate education reform as exemplified by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Charles Blow wrote in the New York Times that "Brown's mother told a local television station after he was killed just weeks after his high school graduation: "Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like they don't got nothing to live for anyway.

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[1] To access the audios marked through this article go to: https://soundcloud.com/landscapes-of-violence/sets/keisch-scott (Right click and select "Open in new tab". Mac users should press Command + click)

'They're going to try to take me out anyway'" (Blow, 2014, para. 22).

Poignantly, two months prior to his killing, education historian Diane Ravitch wrote about Brown's school district, citing it as an egregious example of the neglect of the nation's promise to end racial segregation in schools. She wrote:

> That district had been a high-achieving all-white district in the 1950s. After years of white flight, the district became all-African-American. As its test scores fell, the state of Missouri put the district on provisional accreditation. Help was definitely not on the way. After 18 years of provisional accreditation, the state merged the struggling Normandy district with another struggling, all-black district that had been under state supervision for five years. After the merger, the new district was stripped of accreditation (Ravitch, 2014, para. 1).

Michael Brown's school district, like many other poor and under resourced districts in the country, is one of numerous examples of the ongoing legacy of institutionalized racism in U.S. society and in U.S. schools. If current policymakers were truly working toward justice in public schooling, it would follow that we would see all children enjoying the privileges of schooling environments that the children of the elite experience. Civil rights activist and the first female African American judge in Alabama, Faya Rouse Touré, critically poses this question, exposing the contradictions between policymakers' rhetoric and their practices. She contemplates why anyone *wouldn't* want an education system that is humane for all children, where *every* child has the opportunity and the preparation to achieve his or her potential.

<p align="center">Touré Clip 1</p>

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Education systems in all societies are designed to serve as the primary institutions that reproduce dominant social and economic orders, customs and beliefs systems. In U.S. public education, this makes schooling a function of capitalism, white supremacy and their intrinsic restraints on democracy and social equality. Current efforts to reform primary and secondary public education are based within the violence of white supremacy aligned with the broader brutality of neoliberalism. Elite, Eurocentric education policymakers continue to espouse a language of equity while simultaneously maintaining private elite schools for their own children, spaces that look nothing like the ones they are designing for the masses. This results in a hyper intensification of the sorting of students based on their "value" as defined by a neoliberal worldview steeped in white supremacy. In this system, those identified to have the least amount of value are ultimately deemed disposable.

This article is composed of several components that seem on the surface distinct

but are actually quite connected, and will illustrate the relationship between education reform policies and the lives of children and communities of color in the United States. Essential to this project are selected audio interviews with some of the most powerful U.S. critical education scholars and activists of our time. Alongside our own narrative, we share their voices and stories, collected by Education Radio[2] from July 2011 through June 2012. The two authors of this article were producers for Education Radio, which documented testimony and analysis of the impact of U.S. education reform policies on schools and communities. We have selected pieces of that audio from the Education Radio collection as a way to weave together a narrative of a public education system that is structured—both historically and contemporarily—within the violence of white supremacy. Our hope is that the voices we share will both enhance the story we are telling as well as connect readers more deeply to the issues we discuss.

We begin with the current state of our segregated schools, what Jonathan Kozol refers to as a state of "apartheid education" (Kozol, 2005). Then, we step back and look at the historical and ideological context of U.S. schooling under industrial capitalism, white supremacy and neoliberalism—all creating the perfect storm for the punitive and dehumanizing conditions within 21st century public education. We explore the formula of corporate education reform through an examination of specific instruments used to enact these policies: school choice and charter schools, high-stakes testing, and the disciplining and criminalizing of Black and Brown bodies. We also examine the delivery of these policies via the discourse used to justify them and the intentions behind them. Finally, we call the question of whether public schools are our best hope for achieving social and economic equity, and how those working in this struggle might keep that vision in mind.

Current Context: Separate and Unequal

U.S public schools are more segregated today than they have been since before the desegregation efforts that followed the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case (Kozol, 2005; Mullins, 2013; Rothstein, 2013; Strauss, 2014; UCLA, 2014). Many education scholars have noted the simultaneous widening of the gap between resourced and under-resourced schools over the same time period that the market-based education reforms, heralded by their proponents as addressing this inequity,

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[2] Education Radio was a documentary style radio program that featured interviews, testimony and analysis on issues facing public education in the U.S. through voices of teachers, parents, students, community members, education activists and education scholars. All of Education Radio's shows are archived at: http://education-radio.blogspot.com

have been implemented. Education activist and author Jonathan Kozol reminds us that the travesty lies not just with segregation of schools but within the combination of segregation and inequity - and remarks that if we had separate but equal schools we would at least be living up to the Plessy vs. Ferguson, the landmark 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case that upheld state segregation laws but required those segregated public spaces to be "separate but equal." However, as Kozol laments, U.S. schools are decidedly separate and unequal.

<p align="center">Kozol Clip 1</p>

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Despite the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case, education looks very different for many Black and Brown children than it does for many white children. But in addition to integrating students of different races, desegregation must also address the racist and white supremacist structures institutionalized within U.S. education policy and practices. As education activist and author Soloman Comissiong writes, "After all, has desegregation cleansed the black community of the infestation of American racism and white supremacy? Integration only truly works when the integratee is allowed the same rights, respect, and overall privileges as the integrator" (Comissiong, 2009, para. 2). Half-century after *Brown*, racial segregation in U.S. schools is intensifying, while the current desegregation practices that do exist require children of color to assimilate to and model the behaviors, values and appearances of middle-class white America (Comissiong, 2009). Even if mandates are followed, the threat of structural racism continues and equality of opportunity and equality of outcome remains elusive.

The reality that children are living their lives in vastly segregated spaces—both in and outside of school—shapes how both white and Black students view themselves and their world. In a talk that New York City public school teacher and education activist Brian Jones gave to a group of parents and teachers during Black History Month in February 2012, he describes the way his 6th grade students understood their schooling environment through the lens of segregation and how current policies and rhetoric ignore what it would take to truly address issues of segregation.

<p align="center">Jones Clip 1</p>

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A theme in Jones's stories are the repeated contradictions he points out—that in his class discussion of Ruby Bridges and the success of desegregation—he is speaking to a completely segregated room of Black students, that the schools named after Black civil rights leaders are almost always the most segregated schools and in the most segregated urban areas, and that current education policies—driven by notions of excellence rather than equity—ignore the issues that have the potential to

actually address segregated schooling (i.e., resources). No matter how conspicuous the segregation of schooling, it seems to remain hidden from policymakers who choose to omit it from their discourse.

This standpoint of ignoring race, of ignoring struggles related to poverty and equity in public education—of ignoring any policy that might lead to greater social and economic equity for students and communities of color—must be explored within a wider historical context of white supremacy and neoliberal capitalism.

Historical Context: White Supremacy and Neoliberalism

During the 15th century the Transatlantic Slave Trade, along with the conquest and colonization of the global south and the western hemisphere by European monarchies, set in motion a genocidal era and a corresponding worldview that has inflicted incalculable suffering to this day. This worldview—known as white supremacy—became firmly established in North America with the conquest, mass murder, enslavement and dehumanization of African and Native people by the white Europeans who founded the United States.

According to sociologist Joseph Feagin, this broad worldview is composed of entrenched racist narratives, racist images, racist biases and racist emotions that together construct a powerful belief system that rationalizes systems of racial violence and oppression. Feagin refers to this worldview as the white racial frame, which has two primary subframes. One white racial subframe, often referred to as "white supremacy," affirms the superiority of white people in every possible way including intelligence, work habits, religion, morals, civilization, language and appearance. This powerful pro-white frame comes with a set of attitudes, images, emotions and stereotypes. The second white racial subframe targets and dehumanizes people of color and includes anti-Black, anti-Latino, anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous subframes (Feagin, 2012).

This historical context is essential to understanding that race is not a biological or genetic concept. Rather, it is a social construct manufactured by a dominant group based on their power to impose boundaries of group membership and define race as a means to justify exploitation, subjugation and murder to establish racial superiority. Racism is based on the assertion of white supremacy and operationalizes the ideological, structural, and institutional disparity in the distribution of social and material rewards, benefits, privileges as well as access to resources, capital, property and the possession of social agency, power and influence (Goodman, 2005; Lusca, 2008; Moses, 2004; Ortiz, 2013; Wells, 2013). Moving beyond an understanding of racism as stereotype or bigotry, and grasping the deeply entrenched racial narratives through which white people view the world is a foundational part of any project of

liberation and justice. In addition, it is important to recognize how the virulent legacy of white supremacy persists in all facets of contemporary U.S. society.

While this article presents lived experiences and documented narratives to illustrate the brutal nature of racial terrorism and violence in the U.S., hard data also bear out this reality. People of color make up nearly thirty percent of the U.S. population, yet account for sixty percent of those imprisoned. These incarceration rates disproportionately impact men of color, with 1 in every 15 Black men and 1 in every 36 Latino men incarcerated as opposed to 1 in every 106 white men. One in three Black men will go to prison in their lifetime. While the number of women incarcerated is relatively low in the U.S. (yet has increased by 800 percent over the last thirty years), Black women are three times more likely than white women to be incarcerated; and Latino women are 69 percent more likely than white women to be incarcerated (ACLU, 2011; Bowman, 2010; Kerby, 2012; Sentencing Project, 2007; Sentencing Project, 2014).

Racial profiling also results in people of color having a disproportionate number of encounters with police—they are three times more likely to be searched during a traffic stop compared to white people. Black people are twice as likely to be arrested and almost four times as likely to be subjected to the use of force when encountering the police. Nationwide, young Black males are 21 times more likely to be killed by police compared to young white males (ACLU, 2007; Gabrielson, Jones & Sagara, 2014; Kerby, 2012). According to the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that represents prisoners who have been denied fair treatment in the legal system, "the lives of African Americans have been profoundly shaped by the era of slavery, the era of racial terror that continued from the end of Reconstruction until World War II, the era of Jim Crow and racial apartheid that produced the civil rights movement, and now the era of mass incarceration" (2014, para. 2).

Additionally, felony-disenfranchisement policies in 11 states deny the right to vote to over 10 percent of their Black population. Current efforts by state legislators to implement restrictive voter ID laws that disproportionately impact people of color along with shortened early voting periods, limits on same-day voter registration, polling places without enough voting machines or poll workers are furthering the marginalization of Black and Latino voters (Kerby, 2012; Liebelson, 2014; Oh, 2014; Sentencing Project, 2009).

These forms of racial violence and disenfranchisement disproportionately subject people of color to a life of poverty or economic insecurity that further impedes social, political and economic agency; effectively distressing family systems and severely impacting health outcomes and life expectancy (Marable, 2001; Goldberg, 2012; Ortiz, 2013; Justice Policy Institute, 2014).

In the U.S. the prevailing and deeply rooted social order of white supremacy and structural racism have long served the political, economic and cultural interests of capitalism. Over the past three decades a more expansive and aggressive form of capitalism known as neoliberalism has been imposed on economies globally, mandating the deregulation of private industry and elimination of social welfare programs; eradicating labor, environmental and civil protections; facilitating the privatization and marketization of public sector institutions; and lifting trade and tax barriers in order to maximize corporate shareholder profits across borders. Government's role in this new order is confined to ensuring that corporate subsidies are prioritized over public investment, and that policy decisions further the accumulation of wealth for an elite minority, while austerity is the rule of law for the vast majority. In the U.S. and elsewhere, these social darwinistic policies and practices ensure entirely new levels of suffering for groups who have been, and continue to be, systematically subjugated (Gewirtz, 1995; Apple, 2006; Scott, 2011). Henry Giroux goes on to claim:

> The spectacle of neoliberal misery is too great to deny any more and the only mode of control left by corporate-controlled societies is violence, but a violence that is waged against the most disposable… Under the regime of neoliberalism, the circle of those considered disposable and subject to state violence is now expanding. The heavy hand of the state is not only racist; it is also part of an authoritarian mode of governance willing to do violence to anyone who threatens neoliberal capitalism, white Christian fundamentalism, and the power of the military-industrial-academic-surveillance state (Giroux, 2014, para. 2).

On a global scale over the past thirty-five years, neoliberal ideologues within governments, private think tanks, trade associations and private industries have had their sights set on public education, which in many countries remains the largest public sector institution with the densest unionized workforce. The public school system in the U.S. remains a microcosm of this landscape—with extreme levels of disinvestment and institutionalized means of disposability—manifesting in spaces that are supposed to serve children of color. According to Means, this scheme has:

> …led to a general disinvestment in public schools—especially the most historically neglected and racially segregated—in favor of school privatization initiatives designed to create school systems of 'choice', where parents 'shop' for schools in a competitive marketplace. This has led to the erosion of public schools and the development of charter schools, voucher schemes, and for-profit

schools, effectively allowing corporations to take over large sectors of public education systems throughout the United States. This has coincided with union busting, the imposition of a narrowed and scripted curriculum, the de-skilling of teachers, and the operation of schools under a corporate managerial structure…(2008, p. 4).

Within the neoliberal design, public education systems are well positioned to be transformed into profit-generating enterprises that will effectively control, sort and indoctrinate students to become obedient subjects of a corporatocracy as future workers, prisoners and consumer citizens (Scott & Keisch, 2014). The realities of structural racism coupled with the ruthless nature of neoliberalism—broadly and within education reform—further dehumanizes Black and Brown youth as commodities within the for-profit education marketplace, while also intensifying their disposability on a massive scale.

Chris Kershner of the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce made the dehumanizing design of corporate education reform explicit when he claimed, "The business community is the consumer of the educational product. Students are the educational product. They are going through the education system so that they can be an attractive product for business to consume and hire as a workforce in the future" (Straus, 2014, para. 8).

We see this market logic being applied globally and across spheres. Education scholar Kevin Kumashiro notes the similarity between neoliberal institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's structural adjustment mandates and corporate education reform policies imposed on public schools.

<p align="center">Kumashiro Multi Show Clip 1</p>
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While Kumashiro illustrates how this framework of marketization and global neoliberalism leads to even greater disparities and an increase in structural racism, Professor of Education William Watkins explains that in the U.S., neoliberal ideologues inherited a pre-existing racist society that conveniently serves their interests.

<p align="center">Watkins Charter Clip 1</p>
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Corporate education reformers, who adhere to this neoliberal approach to education imbued with racism, purport to offer their reforms as a way to challenge long-standing education inequities. Attorney and Executive Director of Witness to Innocence David Love talks about the problem with education reformers trying to "sell a bill of goods" to desperate communities, without revealing their true goal of privatization of public schooling. Love reflects on his experience working in

Pennsylvania politics around education issues and his observations during that time that the public was always very concerned about cuts to education, because historically public schools were an important means of social mobility. Love also notes that it is not a coincidence that as school budgets are being cut, prisons budgets are increasing, and there is no shortage of space in prisons for more poor people and people of color.

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[Love Clip 1](#)

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Civil rights activist Faya Rose Touré has underscored, in her advocacy work, how the U.S. education system has always primarily served capitalism and white supremacy. She upholds an alternative vision that includes a holistic approach to schooling in which children's social and emotional needs are met; in which every child has a foundational education across all subjects (including art and music) that serves both vocational and life enriching purposes; and in which all children learn the histories of people of color- including the legacies, accomplishments and the complex and devastating struggles (Touré, 2013). In the following clip Touré notes that Black bodies are no longer needed for their physical labor, and yet their bodies are still needed for the economic success of the prison system. She notes that *her* vision of education (as described above), poses a threat to capitalism.

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[Touré Clip 2](#)

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The Formula of Corporate Education Reform

All of what we have outlined thus far has set the stage for the implementation of corporate education reform policies, which by design, are intended to restructure public education to exist outside of public control and instead serve private profit generating interests (Scott, 2011). Accordingly, journalist Stephanie Simon, reporting at an education investors gathering in 2012, wrote, "The K-12 market is tantalizingly huge: The U.S. spends more than $500 billion a year to educate kids from ages five through 18: The entire education sector…represents nearly 9 percent of U.S. gross domestic product, more than the energy or technology sectors...investors are signaling optimism that a golden moment has arrived. They're pouring private equity and venture capital into scores of companies that aim to profit by taking over broad swaths of public education" (para. 5 & 7).

Moving from ideology to policy, we will examine the ways in which corporate education reform is carried out through a similar formula across the U.S. This formula is enacted in ways that are subtle as well as obvious, but consistently employs the notion of the "free-market" as well as inherently embeds a white

supremacy worldview. Something to keep in mind, as we describe particular instruments employed, is that the children of the wealthy (and usually white) do not have to navigate this formula. Across the board, the children of the elite, including the children of those who are dictating these reforms such as Arne Duncan, Barack Obama, Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, the Walton Family, etc., attend schools that look nothing like those that corporate education reform mandates require. Those children attend private schools with no high-stakes testing, with small classes, with project-based learning and authentic assessment. Those are schools where music and the arts flourish, where learning is approached holistically, and is often self-directed (Cohen 2013; Davies, 2013; Davis, 2014, Sirota, 2012). It is useful to return to the question we posed in the introduction - if these are the schools that are working for the children of the wealthy, why do the schools for the children of the poor look so incredibly different?

There are many instruments used to implement the formula of corporate education reform, which is being carried out in different cities and towns across the U.S. As we articulated in *Education Inc.*,

> Within the scheme of corporate education reform, there is a formula repeatedly being enacted - on state, city and district levels - to institutionalize education reform policies. While slight variations in the formula exist, there are shared elements within several main areas: standardized testing, the market notion of 'choice,' privatization, union-busting, profiteering and workforce development - meaning students as future workers are trained to have the vocational aptitudes required by private sector industries (Scott & Keisch, 2014, para. 8).

Before we examine the specific instruments, it is important to note the coupling of corporate education reform policies and the neoliberalization of cities, which reinforces the displacement of low-income people of color and the gentrification of their communities. Neoliberal education policies contribute to this through "racialized discourses of pathology that legitimate racial exclusion and expropriation of their communities for capital accumulation" (Lipman, 2011, p. 231). Large portions of poor Black and Brown urban communities that have been subjected to neoliberal austerity measures for decades are now being eyed as valuable real estate, for commercial and housing development that serves white middle-class and upper middle-class people (Lipman, 2011, Fenwick, 2013).

Historically, education and housing policy have been closely linked in the structural landscape of racial apartheid in the U.S. Schools have long been a major selling point in terms of housing markets in specific neighborhoods. Realtors will promote a house in a so-called "good" school district, with corresponding higher

home prices. In this case "good" is code for high-performing schools (i.e., high test scores) with college preparatory curriculum, which infers schools with a majority of affluent white children. The relationship between racially segregated neighborhoods and racially segregated schools is also inherent to the neoliberal design. In line with this, policies in cities around the country that seek to disinvest from, close, "flip" or "turnaround" neighborhood public schools in poor communities are contributing to the displacement of low-income Black and Brown residents, replacing these schools with incentivized charter schools that appeal to white middle-class families— essentially greasing the wheels of gentrification.

This process is also being encouraged by current federal policy found in the 2009 federal stimulus that authorized states to allocate billions of dollars in Qualified School Construction Bonds (QSCBs), allowing under resourced schools to access interest-free bond financing. Charter schools conveniently have access to more flexible bond resources than public school districts. "By allocating millions of dollars in little-known bonds exclusively to charters while imposing austerity on public facilities, the state has quietly stacked the deck for charters, leaving neighborhood schools to molder in decline" (Davis, 2014, para. 4). Additionally, many states that receive federal QSCB bonds are primarily allocating them to charter schools. Nationally, charters are being creative, if not notorious, for using their political capital, large financial reserves and leveraging their flexible federal bond resources to "flip" dilapidated public schools, and in some cases other buildings located in poor communities, into charter schools that fit within the larger gentrification plans of cities (Davis, 2014; Fenwick, 2013; Lipman, 2011; Paschall, 2014; Scott, 2013).

Leslie Fenwick, Dean of the Howard University School of Education, adds:
> Whether they are solidly middle- or upper-income or poor, neither group of blacks controls the critical economic levers shaping school reform. And, this is because urban school reform is not about schools or reform. It is about land development...black inner-city residents are suspicious of school reform (particularly when it is attached to neighborhood revitalization) which they view as an imposition from external white elites who are exclusively committed to using schools to recalculate urban land values at the expense of black children, parents and communities (Fenwick, 2013, para. 4).

In the following pages we will focus on three primary instruments used to implement the formula of corporate education reform: the notion of "choice" and charters, high-stakes testing, and discipline and criminalization.

Choice and Charters

The rhetoric of choice is central to the formula of corporate education reform, as it is to all neoliberal policy discourse, and is closely tied to the notion of the free market and viewing students (and their parents) as consumers of education. The purported idea is that if schools are expected to compete for "customers,' they will be forced to improve, thereby increasing equity among schools. This philosophy, in practice, is an illusion that ignores the existing deep racial and class stratification that school districts are already facing when they lose students (and large pieces of their budgets) to charter schools or other public schools. This is also grounded in the "no excuses" rhetoric that implies if a person is just hardworking enough, he or she will succeed—that individuals are either to be rewarded or to blame for their own successes and failures—thus absolving society, the state, or any socioeconomic context of all responsibility (Lack, 2011; Strauss, 2012; Weiss & Long, 2013).

The proliferation of charter schools within the framework of choice is especially pernicious. Charters operate on the tuition they receive from the school district in which the attending student resides and thus are not affected by state level budget cuts. The money that follows children attending charters decimates the local school budgets, as those districts maintain the same brick and mortar expenses that they've always had. Charter proponents will often cite state reimbursement formulas as a justification for this siphoning of funding, however the reality is that districts often face an overall net loss.

In Massachusetts, for example, there is a complicated reimbursement formula that results in much of these monies not being recovered by districts. As state legislative assistant Paul Dunphy described in a letter to the editor of his local paper, "every year there are new charter students, as some enroll and others leave. Under the state formula, public school districts only receive reimbursement if their total charter school costs increase from one year to the next, and the reimbursement is only on the increase. And the reimbursement is made at a declining rate over several years. So in time, virtually the entire financial burden of charter schools falls on public school districts" (Dunphy, 2013). In the city of Holyoke, MA, approximately 85% of children are on free and reduced lunch (a common indicator of low socioeconomic status in schools) (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2013). In FY2014, Holyoke lost nearly $12 million to charters and choice combined and received only $1.8 million from the state in charter reimbursement (Plaisance, 2014a). That same year, due to an incredible $4.5 million budget deficit, the Holyoke schools were faced with cutting programs and laying off teachers, despite protests from students, parents and teachers in the school community (Monahan, 2014; Plaisance,

2014b).

Charter schools fall broadly into two main categories—for profit charters and non-profit charters (often considered to be boutique in nature). In either case, these schools are privately *operated*. As we explained in a column we wrote for our local newspaper, even the so-called boutique charters do not operate as public schools in practice: "To be clear, charters are not traditional public sector schools. They are unaccountable to locally elected school committees and appoint or elect their own boards that control their budgets and hire and fire employees. Charters are labeled 'public' due to being publicly funded and free... for those who are 'fortunate enough to win a spot' via a lottery" (Scott & Keisch, 2013).

An important piece to note is that charter schools are not mandated to accept all students as public schools are, thus, they can push out students who are "undesirable" and who might bring down test scores. In other words, they can push out those students who are distracted by more pressing matters based on their socioeconomic conditions - students who have multiple stressors within their family systems; for whom English is not their first language; whose cultural and ethnic identities are marginalized; who have significant learning challenges; who struggle from mental health conditions; whose learning abilities are incompatible with imposed standards; who require time and attention schools don't allow for; or who don't "fit" into the population those schools are cultivating (Clawson, 2013; Knefel, 2014).

Not surprisingly, research has shown that charters are part of the engine of increasing segregation, as they continue to sort students along race and class lines (UCLA, 2014). A 2014 research review by Iris Rotberg of George Washington University showed that "there is a strong link between school choice programs and an increase in student segregation by race, ethnicity, and income" and that "the risk of segregation is a direct reflection of the design of the school choice program" (Rotberg, 2014). It is not difficult to point to glaring evidence of segregation as a result of charters, particularly in urban areas already experiencing visible segregation (Ahlquist, 2012).

In the following clip Jonathan Kozol notes that corporate education reformers, who have little to no understanding of education but know a lot about business, readily invoke interests in eliminating longstanding educational inequities. He claims they do this by promoting the sorting of poor children according to varying advantages and abilities into what is he refers to as boutique charter schools. Kozol also questions the social values of middle-class liberal white parents who he suggests favor their small alternative and racially-isolated progressive schools; seeming to not

notice or care that poor Black and Latino students are absent from those spaces. Kozol goes on to call this phenomenon "built in apartheid."

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[Kozol Clip 2](#)

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Often those who defend charter schools, particularly the boutique charters, will claim that the *intention* of charters is sound, that some have merely strayed from these intents, and that they can be reclaimed and still have potential as spaces to experiment with education for the social good. However, charters are now so embedded as instruments in the machine of corporatization in the effort to defund public schools—and are so championed by those who seek to obliterate public education and turn it over to the free market—it is difficult to imagine them outside of this framework. Additionally, there is no reason why community public schools can't also experiment and revision public education for the public good, and some are indeed doing that incredibly successfully (see the Mission Hill School in Boston for one such example: http://www.missionhillschool.org/a-year-at-mission-hill/).

In the following clip, William Watkins notes that charter schools originated with good intentions as new experimental models of education that could provide greater creative opportunities within schools. He goes on to explain that this was short lived and instead they became organizations run by "hustlers, grifters and profiteering corporations." Watkins talks about the amount of charter schools that are owned by large corporations, and how once they are granted their charter by a state, they receive public funds and the same capital expenditures that public schools receive, proving to be very profitable.

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[Watkins Charter Clip 2](#)

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One of the most striking examples of charter schools as an essential instrument of the privatization movement in the U.S. is what happened to the New Orleans Public Schools after Hurricane Katrina. The immeasurable destruction that Katrina wreaked on New Orleans was viewed by the U.S. Department of Education, as well as corporate reformers and profiteers as an opportunity for obliterating the public schools in that city, by turning them over to charters (Carr, 2013, Klein, 2011). Arne Duncan's was explicit about this mission when, four years after Katrina, he said in an interview, "I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina" (Anderson, 2009). Now, nine years after Katrina, New Orleans public schools are some of the most segregated and stratified by race and class in the U.S.—as of the fall of 2014, 100% of its schools are charters. While the New Orleans population is made up primarily of people of color, nearly 80% of the city's white students attend the most selective charter schools, according to a

study published by the Institute on Race and Poverty (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2010).

According to *Al Jazeera America* producer Dexter Mullins, other larger urban districts are looking to replicate the New Orleans charter school initiative. He writes, "There are efforts in Washington, D.C.; Detroit, Kansas City, MO; Newark, NJ, and Philadelphia, among others to replicate the New Orleans way of schooling, in part or completely, in an effort to turn around struggling city schools. All those cities have large, socioeconomically disadvantaged populations of color, and the majority live in the inner city, where public schools often receive much less funding and are much more segregated than schools in better-off suburban areas" (Mullins, 2013)

While in New Orleans charters are now the *only* option for students, in other cities and districts it is still easy to understand why a parent might choose to send their child to a charter. In the following clip, former New York City teacher Brian Jones begins by talking about how groups that have been historically marginalized in the US have an understandable propensity to listen to the narrative that the privatizers are telling them - that their child is being underserved, or that their child is a victim of racist schooling. Jones goes on to talk about how corporate reformers create a false narrative about why there is vast economic inequality and then rationalize or deny that they are creating more segregated schools. Jones references one reformer from Goldman Sachs who is setting up charters and exalting Thurgood Marshall at the same time that he is constructing segregated school systems.

[Jones Clip 2](#)

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Investigative journalist Owen Davis underscores Jones's insinuation that there are strong economic motives behind the creation of privatized systems using charter schools. He also notes that charters sort students by those who produce the highest test scores, since those students are seen as the greatest "assets." He writes, "when considering the $5 billion charter school bond markets, with investors inherently making demands that charter schools are good assets, high test scores becomes a financial matter and are required in order for the charter school industry to exist and expand. This naturally drives classroom practices, incentivizes pressure to raise test scores, and intensifies the sorting of students to guarantee student populations that will produce the right test scores" (Davis, 2014).

High Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is the conceptual framework and fundamental instrument in the move to privatize public education and provides the rationale to sort and segregate students and schools according to race, class and ability. It is inherently tied to

standards-based education, which was born out of the social efficiency movement and the scientific management model of education that together served as the foundations by which public education was widely institutionalized in the early 20th century.

During this period of industrialization and mass immigration both industry leaders and the political establishment recognized that in an increasingly inequitable society, a cohesive and mandatory education system needed to be established to serve the purpose of social control, social reproduction and social cohesion; all essential preconditions for social efficiency. Essentially, social efficiency was understood to mean that all institutions in society needed to be aligned to serve the social aims of the dominant culture and industrial capitalism. It was understood that the state, as the great protector of property rights and private industry, was best positioned to establish and oversee an education system that prioritizes human capital development, premised on generating the living commodity of labor power (Dow, 2003; Kliebard, 1986; Ross, 1901; Labaree, 1997).

John F. Bobbitt, who published "The Elimination of Waste in Education" in 1912, became a prominent designer and leader of the social efficiency movement by applying Frederick Taylor's concept of scientific management in factory production to the emerging systems of education (Au, 2009; Bobbitt, 1912).

The idea behind this movement was that social and fiscal waste could be identified and cut, allowing for a social order to be shaped by way of carefully considered systems of scientific planning. The model of attaching the industrial metaphor to schooling was intended to create and maintain the larger social order of industrial capitalism, positing that students were "raw materials" to be molded into refined products according to their future social class positions. Teachers were the disciplined factory workers who utilized the most efficient means to ensure that students (as products) met the encoded standards and objectives of schooling. School administrators were the factory managers who established and dictated to teachers (as factory workers) the most efficient method in the production process. In this model, the school becomes a factory assembly line, designed with the singular intent of reproducing and maintaining existing social orders (Au, 2009; Bobbitt, 1913).

This model of schooling was highly influential and shaped public education for decades to come, on many levels. Bobbitt's views on education, like most of his contemporaries, were explicitly infused with the ideologies of white supremacy and class superiority propagated by eugenics. Drawing on Social Darwinism, the social and scientific movement of eugenics quickly emerged in the 19th century within the new science of human genetics, providing the foundation for social efficiency in

establishing science-based rationales for racial and class hierarchies (Quigley, 1995). Eugenicists advocated putting limitations on political participation based on race and class, arguing the Anglo-Saxon ruling class was in grave danger of "committing racial suicide" resulting from the precipitous reproduction of the "genetically inferior," combined with the steady decline in the birthrate of the genetically superior (Quigley, 1995, para. 1). To address this social crisis, eugenicists advocated for mandatory segregation, sterilization, immigration restriction, and legal prohibition of inter-racial marriage.

In his 1909 article titled *Practical Eugenics*, Bobbitt declared, "if a child is well-born" of Anglo-Saxon "stock" and is thus genetically superior, "he possesses high endowment potential" and is "protected from adverse influences…and abundantly responsive to the positive influences of education" (Bobbitt, 1909, p. 385). Referring to children who were not born of superior genetic "stock," Bobbitt went on to claim:

> …if, on the other hand, the child…springs from a worm-eaten stock, if the foundation plan of his being is distorted and confused in heredity before his unfolding begins, then the problem of healthy normal development is rendered insoluble before it is presented. Such a child is difficult to protect against adverse influences, and he remains to the end stupidly unresponsive to the delicate growth factors of education" (Bobbitt, 1909, p. 385).

Bobbitt and his contemporaries were distressed about the decreasing birthrate of the Anglo-Saxon "stock" and how this would result in a "drying up of the highest, purest tributaries to the stream of heredity" (Bobbitt, 1909, p. 388). He diagnosed the problem as the increased birthrates and immigration of those who are not from the "strains of our imperial race," which were causing a "rising flood in the muddy, undesirable streams" into society (Bobbitt, 1909, p. 388). Bobbitt went on to ponder the problems facing eugenics, which in his words was "the newly-arising science which seeks to improve the inborn qualities of our race" and while "it is easy to see the practical advantages to result from an application of its principles…it is not at all easy to see how it is to be done" (Bobbitt, 1909, p. 386). Apparently he found the solution to this "problem" when he published *Elimination of Waste in Education* two years later.

During this era, newly developed Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests became an instrument to reinforce the hegemony of eugenics and social efficiency, and over time became the basis for standardized tests generally, as a means to efficiently sort

and rank students according to race, class and ability (Knoll, 2009; Quigley, 1995; Richie, 1896). Wayne Au (2009) explains, "the technology of standardized testing… proved to be a pivotal technical, conceptual, and ideological apparatus in the ascendancy of the application of scientific management and models of capitalist production to education" (p. 39). Any authentic historical examination of the establishment of public education in the U.S. cannot ignore its social engineering design through the congruence of scientific management, eugenics and standardized tests. These are also the ideological instruments being reconfigured and reinforced through 21st century corporate education reform policies.

Under the guise of objectivity and fairness, standards-based education—then and now—has always been designed to maintain the myth of meritocracy, which is intended to convey that all people have the opportunity to attain the "American Dream" of economic success if they merely work hard enough.

During the 1980s, the standards-based model was evident within corporate education reforms initiated by the Reagan administration, in partnership with private industry, leading to bipartisan policy initiatives over the succeeding three decades that have systematically restructured public education. The resulting state and federal policies have focused on the construction of a comprehensive standards-based model of education where systems of instruction, assessment, tracking of academic progress and accountability mechanisms are tied to students' ability to demonstrate proficiency according to specific content and performance standards measured by standardized tests (National Academy of Education, 2009; Wixson, Dutro & Athan, 2003). Content standards define what all students should know and be able to do, while performance standards describe and determine the level of proficiency students need to achieve on tests in order to be designated as meeting or exceeding content standards. According to this design, not meeting expectations on expected learning outcomes provides the criteria for imposing rewards and sanctions on students, teachers, administrators and schools (National Center for Fair & Open Testing, 2007; Wixson, Dutro & Athan, 2003).

Content and performance standards and their accompanying tests have become the "high stakes" instruments for corporate reforms in that punitive sanctions are tied to low student test scores, resulting in significant life-altering impacts on the most marginalized students and communities, while at the same time initiating neoliberal restructuring. As we wrote in *Education, Inc.*:

> [standardized testing is] designed by for-profit companies are imposed on state, city and district levels through state-corporate partnerships; sanctions are applied to schools for poor-performance

on these standardized tests; there is increased involvement of for-profit companies supplying test development and preparation, data analysis and management, mandated remedial services and the utilization of proprietary online software. This forces schools and students to experience a greater narrowing of curriculum and focus on rote learning where teachers are expected to be technicians who teach to the test, while their pay and job security is dependent upon test scores that do not capture the most meaningful aspects of teaching and learning (Scott & Keisch, 2014, para. 9).

High stakes testing requires the reduction of teaching and learning to what can be measured quantitatively, and because the tests are the primary measure of progress, they ultimately drive the content and pace of curriculum. In his interview with Education Radio, Ed Brockenbrough describes how white supremacy is manifest in these tests.

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Brockenbrough Clip 1

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The severity of the impact of high stakes testing cannot be understated. The massive and far-reaching high-stakes testing regime has evolved to become a totalitarian instrument used to implement, maintain, and intensify the violence of corporate education reform, and now permeates all sectors of education. It is poised to destroy public education as a site of contestation as well as to obliterate the development of critical capacities for generations of children—both of which are essential for civic participation and social change. It is wreaking havoc on many aspects of healthy and whole child development, and is shifting entirely what teaching and learning inside classrooms looks and feels like, most intensely for groups who have little social agency. In these classrooms, it exacerbates inequity, and mandates the stripping of histories and identities that are essential for the development of self-worth and civic capacities in young people. It positions poor children of color to be more highly controlled and surveilled within an increasingly militarized police state and prison industry. High stakes testing has become the weapon of mass destruction of corporate education reform.

All of this has a profound impact on the day-to-day lives of youth in their schools. In the following audio clip, Wayne Au talks about how testing culture impacts students' self-worth and how it limits their ability to become fully realized human beings and full participants in their communities. He also cites the tests as contributing to the high drop-out rate for students of color. In addition, Au speaks to the criminalization of kids who do poorly on these tests—the "criminalization of failure"—and how these children then are viewed as "bad," which feeds into the

criminalization of youth in society in general.

<p style="text-align:center">Wayne Au Clips 1 and 2 (combined)</p>

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The racism of high stakes tests is not news to those who are being abused by them. Florida high school student Aisha Daniels opted out of her state's standardized testing, with the support of her mother, Ceresta Smith, one of the organizers of United Opt Out. This organization's mission is to draw attention to the devastating impacts of high stakes tests and to offer guidance, support and solidarity for students and parents who choose to opt their children out (http://unitedoptout.com). Aisha explains her reasons for opting out to Education Radio producer Barbara Madeloni, which include feeling the tests are racist and dehumanizing, and not wanting to contribute to a testing company's profits.

<p style="text-align:center">Aisha Daniels Clip</p>

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While Aisha Daniels articulates poignantly the ill-effects of high-stakes testing, many scholars have discussed the toll that testing (and the resulting test-driven curriculum) has had on youth too young to advocate for themselves, especially as testing and/or test preparation is now mandated at even younger ages (FairTest, 2013; Kozol, 2005; Strauss, 2014). In an interview with Education Radio, early childhood education scholar Nancy Carlsson Paige talks about the stress that young children are experiencing as a result of the coupling of the financial strain that can create stress within the family system with intense pressures at school to succeed within the testing environment. She emphasizes that instead of a focus on play, which is essential for children to learn and explore their world, they are receiving developmentally inappropriate material driven by the standardized curriculum and testing that results in rote memorization rather than authentic learning. She notes that from the perspective of a young child, "it has got to feel stressful and anxiety-laden if you are trying to please a teacher by memorizing something that you don't really understand."

<p style="text-align:center">Nancy Carlsson-Paige (NCP) Clip</p>

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Discipline and Criminalization

Corporate education policies impose highly controlling and disciplinarian schooling models on poor Black and Brown children, utilizing strict Skinnerian controls on behavior, rote methods of instruction and assessment; disabling a child's capacity to critically reflect, while setting many up to fail and be sorted into the insatiable school to prison pipeline (Kozol, 2005; Thomas 2013). This intensification of discipline in schools and the resulting criminalization is yet another instrument of the corporate

education reform formula.

Just as people of color in the U.S. are disproportionately policed and incarcerated (as previously cited), there is a similar trend with students of color inside schools. Sophia Kirby writes, "Students of color face harsher punishments in school than their white peers, leading to a higher number of youth of color incarcerated. Black and Hispanic students represent more than 70 percent of those involved in school-related arrests or referrals to law enforcement." (Kirby, 2012).

As a social psychologist who engages in participatory action research around injustice in schools and prisons, CUNY professor Michelle Fine has spent a great deal of time in urban public schools. She has observed the increased police presence (and resulting accelerated arrests for otherwise basic disciplinary actions) in New York City schools. In the following clip, Fine shares the heart-wrenching story of what happens to a particular student who was rushing to make a before-school appointment with her college counselor, and thwarted the security officer's attempt to stop her from running up the stairs to the appointment before the school was officially open.

<div align="center">Fine Clip 1</div>

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Tragically, this student's story is not unique, and these increasingly severe procedures in urban schools reveal that it is becoming all too common for routine disciplinary matters to be handled not by school administration, but by law enforcement. Sarah Carr has written extensively about these practices, especially within the charterization of schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. Carr explains,

> Untangling causation and correlation is obviously no easy matter, but one statewide study in Texas reported that students suspended or expelled for a "discretionary violation"—having a bad attitude, for example—were nearly three times as likely to come into contact with the juvenile-justice system the following year. Ramifications like these have spurred several large urban districts (Baltimore, Los Angeles, Chicago) to take aggressive measures over the past couple of years to curb discretionary discipline tactics. Schools have begun banning suspensions, for instance, for vaguely defined offenses like "willful defiance," which can contribute to the troubling racial disparities, several experts have concluded (Carr, 2014, para. 19).

Charles Blow's recent column in the New York Times, *Michael Brown and Black Men*, shared stark statistics about these practices. Blow cites a 2010 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center that found, in a study of 18 of the nation's largest school districts, that suspension rates for Black male students is more than double

what the average rate is for all students in that age group (Blow, 2014). Blow also reports that dropout rates are similarly disproportionate. He writes,

> Black male dropout rates are more than one and a half times those of white males, and when you look at the percentage of black men who graduate on time - in four years, not including those who possibly go on to get G.E.D.s, transfer to other schools or fail grades - the numbers are truly horrific. Only about half of these black men graduate on time. Now, the snowball is rolling. The bias of the educational system bleeds easily into the bias of the criminal justice system — from cops to courts to correctional facilities. The school-to-prison pipeline is complete. A May report by the Brookings Institution found: "There is nearly a 70 percent chance that an African American man without a high school diploma will be imprisoned by his mid-thirties (Blow, 2014, para. 10-12).

All of this contributes to a cultural understanding of both in and out-of-school discipline that accepts as common sense that children of color are future criminals who must be surveilled. Ed Brockenbrough discusses how white supremacy is manifested through the monitoring of bodies in schools—the fact that Black and Brown bodies are seen as dangerous, that in urban areas there are metal detectors that do not exist in more suburban areas despite the high profile episodes of school violence in the suburbs. He goes on to note that Black boys are treated as criminals from a very young age, contributing to the school to prison pipeline.

<p align="center">Brocken. Clip</p>

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In his article, *Education Reform in the New Jim Crow Era*, P.L. Thomas draws connections between the similar insidiousness of the racism in both the war on drugs and corporate education reform, while the rhetoric of both initiatives purport instead to address inequities. He refers to both Sarah Carr's work on charter schools in New Orleans and Michelle Alexander's on the New Jim Crow to emphasize the limitations of choice when one's choices are so intensely constrained. Thomas writes, "Carr reports that African American parents not only choose 'no excuses' charter schools in New Orleans, but also actively cheer and encourage the authoritarian policies voiced by the schools' administrators" (2013, para. 40). Quoting Alexander, Thomas writes, "Given the dilemma facing poor black communities, it is inaccurate to say that black people 'support' mass incarceration or 'get-tough' policies" since "if the only choice that is offered blacks is rampant crime or more prisons, the predictable (and understandable) answer will be 'more prisons'" (2013, para. 40).

Professor of Education Erica Meiners refers to this phenomenon not as a

school-to-prison pipeline which she feels is too linear of a metaphor, but as a "prison nexus." She suggests this prison nexus operates in schools in three ways: with increasing disciplinary actions, special education labeling, and the interlocking of schools with the juvenile justice system and policing. She also points out the broader aspects of the nexus, which include a massive expansion of prisons and work camps.

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Meiners Clip 1

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More recently there is evidence of criminalization happening at even younger levels—an increase in academic and rote instruction and harsher disciplinary tactics for children as young as the pre-school age (Gilliam, 2005; Powell, 2014; Smith, 2014). A 2014 study by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights found that "suspension of preschool children, by race/ethnicity and gender (new for 2011-2012 collection): Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension; in comparison, white students represent 43% of preschool enrollment but 26% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension." The reasons given for these suspensions are primarily discipline-related (USDOE, 2014). When these tactics are this pervasive, starting at these young ages, the predetermination of certain tracks for children of color is that much more solidified.

The Discourse and Intentions of Corporate Education Reform

How is this formula presented within dominant discourse, and what is the intent behind those delivering it? Corporate education reformers, such as Arne Duncan, Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, and others, often use a language of social justice when they talk about both the intent and impact of these reforms.

When interviewed by Education Radio, Bill Watkins was asked to respond to the rhetoric of these messages from corporate reformers—such as the insistence that these reforms will close the achievement gap, despite research that has proven otherwise. Watkins explains that the reformers have appropriated populist language, which is a common tactic for conservative forces throughout history.

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Watkins Charter Clip 3

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Faya Rose Touré also identifies the social justice rhetoric used to encourage people to buy into corporate education reform initiatives. Like Watkins, Touré encourages a disregard of the discourse, which has always been about what she calls "deliberate miseducation." She points out that even the phrase "liberty and justice for all" was intended for white men, and reflects that until critical thinking is taught,

however, students will not be prepared to analyze these messages.

<p style="text-align:center">Touré Clip 3</p>

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Touré's point is well taken. This slippery discourse makes it difficult for those unfamiliar with education policy, or with the on-the-ground impacts of under-resourced schools, to interpret the meaning and impact of their message outside of the white racial frame in which they operate, which can reinforce their white supremacist and colonialist worldviews. Investigative journalist Owen Davis talks about his work in Newark, NJ charter schools. He writes, "when you see a mostly young, white staff excitedly parading around and enforcing extreme discipline on an entirely black student population with posters of MLK and Malcolm X on the walls, it produces an extreme sense of discomfort. It's just bizarre to consider how the rhetoric of civil rights is being used to push these systems that, when you take a step back, you realize are not the ideal of the open free progressive public school. If that's the vision that these reformers have of emancipation or progress, then there's a real problem there" (Davis, 2014, para. 16).

As for those who are experiencing disinvestment in their communities and schools first-hand, the language of social justice through the guise of choice or meritocracy can have understandable appeal. When success in an economic and socio-cultural context requires participation in the framework of white supremacy that defines it, a tension can arise between social agency and restricted options. Pauline Lipman notes that the discourse of choice, in particular, legitimately resonates with many due to the lack of real educational equity and opportunities, historically, for Black, Latino and working-class students. She points out that there have always been choices for white economically privileged parents through their social and cultural capital providing them the ability to be more mobile, allowing them to choose better public school systems or pay for private schools.

Lipman asserts that the discourse of choice understandably appeals to marginalized groups who have only had access to schools with very few resources and inadequate materials and infrastructure, thus providing a poorer quality of education. According to Lipman, such a discourse speaks to parents who wish for a better education for their children—through having the option to move their children to schools that are perceived to be better. When people who have had little agency in their lives are finally offered a "choice," after having tried in vain to address issues of inequality, racism and unhealthy conditions in their school systems, they are likely to seize upon it.

<p style="text-align:center">Lipman Clip 1</p>

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It is easy to see why this discourse is palatable to many, as it is embedded within the familiar and accepted framework of capitalism. Lipman goes on to point out how the discourse of choice is marketed to people, requiring them to be individualistic consumers in a marketplace of education, where parents compete against one another to get their children into schools which they perceive as being superior.

[Lipman Clip 2](#)

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It is understandable to question the motivation or intent of those who are driving corporate education reform, aside from the obvious economic boon for those who are profiting from these reforms. As far back as 1998, Fortune magazine predicted that, "education, broadly defined, will emerge as one of the leading investment sectors over the next 20 years" (Justin, 1998, p.198; Means, 2008). However, is it possible that some "reformers," who are committed to a market-based approach to education, truly believe that their reforms will close the so-called achievement gap? Michelle Fine reflects on a time when she was working on her book *Framing Dropouts* and was looking for the "bad guys" who were responsible for the devastating impacts of these reforms. She then talks about her realization that rather, "everyone was just sort of doing their job" and that in a machine of racism, segregation, mass incarceration and underfunding of public education, people didn't need to be evil to produce terrible outcomes, the terrible outcomes were just built into the larger system they were upholding.

[Fine Clip 2](#)

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Lipman writes:

> "In the United States, dominant interests convince the vast majority of people to accept massive social inequality and unequal power relations through processes of cultural hegemony—the construction of 'commonsense' understandings, or taken-for-granted assumptions, about social reality that legitimate the social order. Hegemony works to impose a particular understanding of social problems and to define the parameters of possible alternatives so as to limit the possibility of thinking otherwise. In this way social inequality and unequal relations of power are legitimated, normalized, and perceived as inevitable" (Lipman, 2004, p. 14).

Kevin Kumashiro, Dean of the School of Education at San Francisco University, further examines intent, by posing the crucial question: what if these corporate education reforms aren't failing? What if they are doing exactly what they were set

up to do, by widening disparities in schools? He notes that in some ways this is intentional and by design, driven by people (like free-market economist Milton Friedman) who felt that public schools should not exist and privatization was the solution. But he also notes that there are many reformers who actually believe that the policies they promote will indeed improve public education.

<p style="text-align:center">Kumashiro Multi Show Clip 2</p>

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These notions—of how this discourse is formed and reproduced in and outside of schools and how public consent for these notions are manufactured—are an essential part of how the racism of education reform operates. Understanding the hegemony of the white racial frame and how it works to reinforce the prevailing neoliberal ideology that has intensified over the past forty years is essential to understanding how corporate education reform discourse serves to uphold "common sense" thinking about the purpose and content of education; a discourse that ultimately reproduces and maintains racial violence and furthers the practices of disposability within existing and inequitable social and economic orders (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The evidence of how white supremacy intersects with the theme of disposability is never so evident than in the intentional destruction of the Mexican American Studies (or Raza Studies) program in the Tucson Unified School District. Located sixty miles north of the Mexican-U.S. border, Tucson, Arizona is a location where the brutality of white supremacy is well documented—dating back to the Spanish Requerimiento, a divinely ordained right to take possession of land and conquer, subjugate and exploit Native Americans throughout the hemisphere. Since the U.S. took possession of this region in 1853, subjugation, criminalization, disenfranchisement and cultural genocide of Native Americans, Latin American immigrants and Mexican-Americans has persisted to this day. Due to this history, Chicano /Chicana movements throughout the U.S. southwest have developed a strong tradition of resistance over the decades that has encompassed a broad range of liberatory goals, including restoral of land, civil, social and political rights, educational equality, worker rights, immigration rights and cultural affirmation (Education Radio, 2012; Rodriguez, 2011; Viva La Raza!, 2014).

In 1974, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sued the Tucson Unified School District in federal court, based on long-standing segregation practices and discrimination against its Black students. That same year the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed a later-consolidated lawsuit claiming similar allegations on behalf of Mexican American students. In 1978 a settlement was reached which included a comprehensive

desegregation plan. Resulting from these and other longstanding struggles and legal actions, and with over 60 percent of TUSD's students sharing a Mexican American identity, efforts to improve retention and graduation rates among Mexican American students were addressed by TUSD. In 1998 the district established Raza Studies, designed by Chicano educators (Education Radio, 2012; TUSD, 2014).

The Raza Studies program incorporated indigenous (or maíz–based) concepts, and is linked to the fight for civil and human rights, social justice and the undoing of hundreds of years of colonization and dehumanization, which is at the core of Chicano/Chicana movements (Education Radio, 2012; Rodriquez, 2013). The program was an extraordinary success. Ninety percent of students who participated in the Raza Studies program graduated high school, compared to 44 percent nationally. Seventy percent entered college, compared to 24 percent nationally. Raza Studies students scored much higher on the Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards test compared to other Hispanic students who did not take the classes (Aronson. 2014; Planas, 2012). David Stovall, Professor of Education at University of Illinois Chicago, was part of a team that performed an independent study of these gains. In the following clip, he explains what they found.

<p style="text-align:center">Stoval Clip 1</p>

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Due to the program's deeply meaningful curriculum based in identity affirming counter narratives, underscored by these significant academic gains, it came to be viewed as a direct threat to the white leadership in the district and in the state. In 2010 Arizona governor Jan Brewer signed a bill intended on targeting TUSD's Raza Studies, which "bans schools from teaching classes that are designed for students of a particular ethnic group, promote resentment or advocate ethnic solidarity over treating pupils as individuals. The bill also bans classes that promote the overthrow of the U.S. government" (Santa Cruz, 2010, para. 3). Led by Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne and state schools Superintendent John Huppenthal, a legal and public crusade to destroy Raza Studies ensued with claims that the program was not only illegal (despite and independent audit claiming otherwise), but according to Horne "if this were a KKK course, all would agree that the Legislature has a legitimate interest in prohibiting it," bizarrely reasoning that it promotes "racist values" (Huicochea, 2012, para. 10).

The contradiction here is perverse. Education reformers claim that the end goal is higher test scores that will lead to greater equity for all students. Here is a case (and

it is not by any means the first or only one[3]) in which enormous gains were clearly demonstrated for a group of students—not only in test scores but also across the board with regard to attendance, grades, and overall student satisfaction. And yet this was also a result of students feeling empowered through gaining a deep and meaningful understanding of their cultural identities and histories, including the brutality of conquest and colonization that has led to current social conditions. The idea of students developing this self-efficacy, of gaining knowledge of that history, knowledge that contradicted the historical narratives of those in power—ultimately led to the destruction of the program by leadership who felt threatened by it. In the following clip, David Stovall talks about how the politics of disposability is evident in the destruction of ethnic studies in Tucson.

<p style="text-align:center">Stoval Clip 2</p>
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Is Public Education Our Best Hope?

When we understand that racial violence has always been woven into the public education system, the "good ole days" of public education—as is often cited by white middle-class public education advocates—is exposed to be a dangerous myth. While this is the case, we must also recognize that universal public education—democratically controlled, equitably funded, free and easily accessible to all, and based in a social and restorative justice curriculum—provides the greatest potential for schools to serve as essential sites of contestation; where critical capacities are generated as vital precursors to actions that can disrupt and change these existing orders.

David Love asserts that public education is absolutely necessary because *everyone* has access, and that learning from people from different backgrounds, and learning tolerance, is important. But he also calls for public schools to address what he feels like he gained from his own public education - support for overall growth and

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[3] The "Back to Basics movement" of the 1970s, coupled with Reagan's *A Nation at Risk* report, served as a way to quell significant gains for students of color. Back to Basics called for a return to a strict social efficiency model of schooling, and among other things was a response to social and cultural shifts resulting from the Civil Rights, Black Power, Women's, Anti-war and New Left movements of the 1960's and 1970's. During this period, many aspects of "traditional American" education were being disrupted and reconsidered to various degrees, resulting in more child-centered curriculum and pedagogy and the inclusion of ethnic studies, revisionist histories and democratic models of education. Education inequities were also being addressed legislatively and legally resulting in school desegregation, affirmative action and Head Start, leading to a shrinking achievement gap for Black high school students during the 1970s and 1980s. (Barton & Coley, 2010)

development around how to be a good person.

<div align="center">

[Love Clip 2](#)

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Touré echoes this when she talks about the philosophy of education embraced by her Selma, AL organization, Replacing Inequities in School with Excellence (RISE). RISE is dedicated to de-tracking in schools, and embraces a philosophy that schools should be holistic, meeting the needs of children's bodies, spirits and minds.

<div align="center">

[Touré Clips 4 and 5 (combined)](#)

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In an interview with Noam Chomsky in 2003, Chomsky was asked to respond to his thoughts on John Dewey's philosophy of democracy and education—and his thoughts echo those of both Love and Touré about the need for a holistic approach. Chomsky (2003) responded,

> A decent educational system would allow these natural aspects of human nature to flourish and encourage them. And it would be part of developing a free and democratic society of real participation. But of course that runs counter to elite interests. It's worth remembering that the United States was not founded to be a democratic society and elites do not want it to be a democratic society. It's supposed to be what political scientists sometimes call a "polyarchy," a system basically of elite decision and public ratification. And if you had the kind of educational system that Dewey spent his life committed to, you wouldn't be able to sustain that. People would become active, involved, engaged, and would try to create a truly functioning democratic society (para. 2).

Chomsky nails the crux of the paradox, here: the creation of a true public education—an education for democracy—poses fundamental challenges to existing systems. How are such embedded and seemingly unyielding notions disrupted? Kumashiro gives us hope by reminding us of the longstanding history of disruption in schooling

<div align="center">

[Kumahsiro Multi Show Clip 3](#)

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Public education as it was envisioned during the early 20th century by those who opposed the scientific management model of education and who viewed education as a means of resistance and/or as a potential to be a democratizing medium included, among others, John Dewey, Jane Adams, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Francis Parker. Dubois, who viewed education as having power beyond that of creating future workers and saw the great potential of education as a tool for liberation,

famously wrote, "education must not simply teach work, it must teach life" (Provenzo, 2002, p. 92). Zilversmit explains that during this period, which is often referred to as "the progressive era," democratic educators wanted to circumvent the regimentation that exemplified most classrooms of the time, and instead they "enlisted the spontaneous interests of the pupils and adapted the curriculum to the interests and needs of each child" (2005, para. 3). The idea was that replacing the authoritarian approach with a more democratic approach to teaching and learning would provide a model for a more democratic society.

Ultimately, however, progressive education movements lost traction to the social efficiency movement as a result of the political backlash against the left during and after World War I, but maintained notable influence until the fascist fervor of the cold war era following World War II. Regardless of the influence of twentieth century progressive educators, throughout the 20th century, public education continued to primarily serve an important function in the reproduction of the social and economic inequalities that are a structural reality of the U.S. political economy (Keisch, 2013).

As it stands, current education policy is incapable of wrestling with the structural inequalities that are inherent to white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy—issues that education is compelled to address today if the goal is true participatory democracy. However, that progressive vision of universal public education can be viewed as a starting point that, over the past thirty-five years with the omnipresence of neoliberalism, the pernicious and unrelenting attempts to erode the public sphere, and the increasing imposition of standardization on education, has veered dangerously off course and even farther away from its potential. So this begs the question: what are the important directions for this struggle?

It is essential to view the solution holistically and connected across sectors. Pauline Lipman writes, "the struggle over education is part of the contest for the city and in relation to struggles for housing, living wage jobs, public transit, access to public space, and against police abuse and race and class exclusion" (Lipman, 2011, p. 231). With regard specifically to schools, Lipman speaks directly to the need to remove the notion of choice by creating high quality schools in every neighborhood so that parents don't have to be put in a position where they compete against one another to get their child into the better school.

<p align="center">Lipman Clip 3</p>

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Communities and schools (and even individual classrooms) serve as sites of struggle and contestation, as individuals weigh the "common sense" understandings

that are delivered to them from their own lived experience and social identities (which is all too frequently dismissed as a legitimate source of learning), and thus they also become spaces of hope and possibility. Lipman writes, "because dominant ways of seeing the world conflict with people's real experiences and competing ideologies hegemony is never secure and must be continually reconstructed" (Lipman, 2004, p.14).

Resistance is occurring. It is important to recognize the grassroots efforts gaining momentum around the U.S. (and the world) that are coming together to not only resist corporate education reform but to revision public education in general. Erica Meiners talks about the excitement she feels about the young people who are naming the injustice and organizing against it, as well as the diverse amount of resistance to corporate education reform from activist groups including parents, teachers and others around issues such as the deprofessionalization of teachers, working toward restorative justice, and the development of alternative accountability systems.

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Meiners Clip 2

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However, while there is indeed a growing state-level and national movement against corporate education reform, it is essential that this struggle be centered in the fight for racial justice throughout society. In fact, the opportunity is now. As this article is "going to press," a powerful grassroots movement for racial justice, comprised of both local and national groups, is emerging in the U.S. As a result of the ongoing destruction and degradation of Black lives, prior to and after the murder of Michael Brown, "Black Lives Matter" became a powerful slogan for massive civil rights protests and an evolving national network of social justice campaigns. The mission of one of the leading organizations, Black Lives Matter, includes the following: "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression (Black Lives Matter, 2014, para. 2). This movement places at the forefront the systemic nature of racism and white supremacy and the importance of addressing the manifestation of these in all public spheres, including education. One of the central demands of another leading group, Ferguson Action, is an "end to the school to prison pipeline and quality education for all" (Ferguson Action, 2014).

As Professor of Education and education activist Nelson Flores notes:

It is the fundamental disposability of black and brown bodies that has led to the disinvestment in communities of color and the public

schools that serve them. It is the fundamental disposability of black and brown bodies that has allowed for children of color to become commodities that can increase the profit margins of corporations. It is the fundamental disposability of black and brown bodies that has allowed for the criminalization of youth of color and the creation of the school-to-prison pipeline. And it is the fundamental disposability that has allowed for the implementation of a testing regime that delegitimizes the knowledge of communities of color (Flores, 2014, para. 8).

Thus, working toward a racially just and equitable public education system cannot be achieved without simultaneously challenging white supremacy and structural racism in all other aspects of society. As professor of women's studies and Black feminist theorist Brittney Cooper proposes in a recent piece for Salon Magazine:

If the U.S. would "clean up its act," this would necessarily mean a real commitment to due process, protection of voting rights, a livable wage, the dissolution of the prison industrial complex, funding of good public education at both K-12 and college levels, a serious commitment to affirmative action, food security and full reproductive justice for all women. Those are the kinds of conditions under which black communities, and all communities, could thrive. That kind of commitment to the ideals of democracy would require us, as my friend activist Marlon Peterson did recently, to "ask not what you can do for your country. Ask what your country can *undo* for you (Cooper, 2014, para.13).

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